Transcript - Global News - Emergency Preparedness Minister Bill Blair discusses protests across the country - February 13, 2022

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Summary: Emergency Preparedness Minister Bill Blair discusses protests across the country

Mercedes Stephenson: While blockades, protests and demonstrations continue to pop up across the country, and in some places, go on for days and days. Everywhere from the Windsor Bridge to the Pacific crossing at the border in B.C., to of course, right here in downtown Ottawa, folks have been living with these protests which have now become a major state of emergency here in the province of Ontario. Joining us to talk about this is Minister Bill Blair, who is of course, the minister for emergency preparedness for the federal government. Nice to see you, Minister Blair.

Bill Blair, Emergency Preparedness Minister: Good morning, Mercedes.

Mercedes Stephenson: Sir, what do you make of what's happening in the country right now?

Bill Blair, Emergency Preparedness Minister: Well, you know, I think we see in part, in these protests, the frustration that everyone feels with this pandemic and I think we're all anxious to see it end. But I think it's also very clear that there is—there are people within that protest and organizing their response who are clearly trying to do as much harm as possible to the country. You know we've seen it evidenced in the chaos that has existed in the City of Ottawa, but most particularly the targeting of crucial infrastructure and particularly some of our most important border entry points, cutting off the flow of trades and goods, which is idling thousands of workers, you know, costing the Canadian economy an enormous amount of money and clearly, their intent is to cause as much harm to Canada and to Canadians as possible. And so we now have a situation where it's clearly a very significant and serious public order event and we all need the police to do their job. And to that end, we've been working to make sure they have the resources and the tools that they need to do it, but ultimately it comes down to the police need to restore order, to enforce the law and to open up those point of entry and restore public safety in the City of Ottawa. We've seen some evidence, by the way, Mercedes, even this morning, where over the past 24 hours, the OPP led police contingent in Windsor has been moving, I think, very purposely and carefully, proportional to the situation but have now begun to make arrests to open up that border, and that's exactly what we need the police to do in this country to restore order and to uphold the law.

Mercedes Stephenson: Do you think that the Ottawa Police have failed to do this job? And if so, why do you think that's happening?

Bill Blair, Emergency Preparedness Minister: Well I think that there'll be a great deal of reflection at the end as to why the situation has evolved the way it has in the City of Ottawa. But I was much encouraged this week, first of all, by the establishment of an integrated command team where now the OPP and the RCMP are joined at the command table with the OPS in order to bring order and to

enforce the law at this event. We've also been working to make sure that we bring as many police resources as are required to do the job here, but ultimately it comes down to the police have to enforce the law and to do their job. We're making sure that they've got the tools and resources to do it and we're all very hopeful that they'll be able to bring the situation under control utilizing the tools and resources that have been made available to them.

Mercedes Stephenson: What is your government's plan to deal with this, because the situation in Ottawa is obviously quite entrenched but it's clear that this is not unique to Ottawa or unique to Ontario? It's becoming an issue at border crossings across the country. The prime minister has said everything is on the table. All options are on the table. What does that mean for the federal government who has a responsibility to protect critical infrastructure.

Bill Blair, Emergency Preparedness Minister: All three orders of government have responsibilities here, including of course, the federal government. And you're right. My particular concern is the threat that these protests represent to critical infrastructure in these countries, particularly our border crossings but other aspects of critical infrastructure: transportation, manufacturing. Even the delivery of foodstuffs and pharmaceuticals to our shelves that Canadians need every single day, is being threatened by the activities, the criminal activities of the people engaged in these blockades. And so we've been working very closely with our provincial partners, first all, because—and we saw evidence of the success of that. You know we've been working very—like I know the prime minister and the premier have spoken a number of times, as have minister of counterparts on what the province and the federal government need to do together. Very, very pleased with the decision that was made in Ontario to declare an emergency and to enact important regulations. We've also been working to make sure that our law enforcement agencies have the tools they need, but Mercedes, I want to assure Canadians we—I recognize the threat, and my government does, that these blockades in particular, hold for all Canadians. We saw now blockades taking place in British Columbia, in Alberta, Manitoba and in Ontario. We need the police to do their job and we have to make sure that they're there, but we also are prepared to use whatever legislative and resource tools. And I want I mean by that is every federal resource is—will be considered in order to protect critical infrastructure and to keep Canadians safe. The police have an important job to do, but there are other jobs that also need to be done and we'll make sure they get done

Mercedes Stephenson: Are you prepared to invoke the Emergencies Act?

Bill Blair, Emergency Preparedness Minister: Certainly. I will tell you, the Emergencies Act has been under a very fulsome consideration right from the first day, as to what needs to be done. But the Emergencies Act—the federal Emergencies Act is really contingent upon the provinces exhausting their authorities and turning to us and saying we need more. And that's why the conversations with the provinces have been so important. And we saw on Friday, the province of Ontario has now, I think, gone all in and I'm very, very grateful for the work that they've done to make those tools available. We'll see if their effectiveness is sufficient to bring the situation in Ontario under control. We're also looking really carefully on what's happening. The people who are behind these blockades, you know, are clearly trying to disperse police resources and challenge us at—in other provinces—provincial jurisdictions. That's why that collaboration between provinces and territories is so important. And, you know, policing is such a local thing in this country and we've seen it in the municipality. We've been working the mayor. We've been working with the Ottawa city council, bringing the province to the table, bringing in our resources to the table. Like everybody's got a job to do here and a responsibility, but that I want to assure you that we recognize that the threat to Canada, to Canadians, to our livelihoods and to our prosperity, that these protests represent this isn't about the vaccines anymore. This is something and is deeply concerning. We need the police to do their job.

Mercedes Stephenson: Can I ask you what you think it's about then? Because they're saying it is about vaccines. When we're out in the street talking to people, that's the feedback I'm hearing from people who are protesting. What do you think it's really about then?

Bill Blair, Emergency Preparedness Minister: Well I'm not sure what cutting off essential supplies and goods to Canadians has to do with vaccines. You know, I think there's—you know, I get everybody's frustrated and we want to see this come to an end, but it is clear the intent of these blockades in particular, is to harm Canadians and harm the country and that doesn't have anything to do with vaccines. And I think we all have to recognize that, you know, the harm that is being caused by these individuals, and it's not about people's frustration with the pandemic, the vaccine mandates that were put in place were put in place to protect Canadians and we're not through this pandemic yet. And so we're going to continue to do the things that are necessary to protect Canadians and at the same time, you know, we're all working very hard to get—make sure that vaccines are available, that we do all of the things that are necessary to keep Canadians safe, but, you know, idling thousands of workers in Ontario at our auto plants, cutting off the supply of produce and everything else, the intent of that is not to express frustration with vaccine mandates. The intent of that is to harm the country and it needs to stop. And we need the police to do their job in order to stop it.

Mercedes Stephenson: When you look at the political situation here, you're a former police officer so you know the police can clear one bridge and people can go to another. They can clear one protest and it pops up somewhere else. There is very much a strong political undercurrent to this, whether it's the people who are out protesting because they're upset with the vaccine mandates, or whether it's the people who've signed off on the memorandum of understanding that says they want to overthrow your government and install a citizen's committee. There's a wide range of political expression here. Your government has been criticized by members of your own caucus, including by Joël Lightbound, who is, of course, a Liberal MP. He said earlier this week that he couldn't help but notice with regret both the tone and policies of my government change drastically on the eve and during the last election. A decision was made to wedge and divide and to stigmatize. Do you fear that by the way you're talking about these protests and the refusal to listen, the refusal to meet with anybody who's involved with them, that you're potentially creating a greater wedge and divide that is further polarizing people and potentially opening them up for radicalization?

Bill Blair, Emergency Preparedness Minister: Mercedes, we're completely open to discussions with Canadians about the health measures that are necessary and that we've implemented in order to keep Canadians safe. We're not prepared to negotiate the overthrow of the government and quite frankly, some of…

Mercedes Stephenson: No, but the tone on this, perhaps. Not to actually capitulate the government, of course.

Bill Blair, Emergency Preparedness Minister: Listen, I think that from the beginning there's been an acknowledgement that we have to be there to support Canadians through the pandemic. You know, we've been there with financial supports for families and for businesses. We've implemented with herculean effort to procure vaccines and personal protective equipment (PPE). We've been working very hard to protect Canadians and we understand that there is a segment of society that doesn't believe in the science and doesn't accept the importance of vaccines but that doesn't mean the science isn't true and that we don't have to continue to do all of the things that are necessary.

Mercedes Stephenson: I'm so sorry to cut you off. We're out of time. We're very tight today. My sincere apologies for cutting you off. Thank you for joining us. I think still lots of questions about the government's tone to come. We'll be back with those. Thanks for making time.

Bill Blair, Emergency Preparedness Minister: Thank you very much for having me this morning, Mercedes. Have a good day.

Mercedes Stephenson: Coming up next, Alberta Premier Jason Kenney joins us on the show.

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